

3-1-1925

Iowa at the New Orleans Fair

Bruce E. Mahan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mahan, Bruce E. "Iowa at the New Orleans Fair." *The Palimpsest* 6 (1925), 77-94.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol6/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. VI

ISSUED IN MARCH 1925

NO. 3

COPYRIGHT 1925 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Iowa at the New Orleans Fair

When Iowa was invited to participate in the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition to be held at New Orleans from December 16, 1884, to June 1, 1885, many citizens of the State favored active support of the project. The prize-winning Hawkeye exhibits in the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876 had resulted in an increased demand for Iowa products, and it was argued that the New Orleans fair would afford an opportunity to establish advantageous commercial relations with States to the south. Popular approval was given additional impetus when the President of the United States appointed Herbert S. Fairall of Iowa City as Commissioner and John S. Ely of Cedar Rapids as Alternate Commissioner to represent Iowa.

Although the preliminary plans were comprehensive and ambitious, the fact that Congress neglected

to make an appropriation for the preparation and support of the Exposition, convinced the General Assembly of Iowa that the enterprise would be only local in character, and consequently a bill to appropriate \$10,000 for an Iowa exhibit never came to a vote. Much the same indifference was shown by other State legislatures then in session. A few weeks after the General Assembly of Iowa adjourned, however, Congress voted a loan of a million dollars to the Exposition and a third of a million more for a government exhibit. This action changed the status of the New Orleans Exposition from a local project to a World's Fair, and preparations for it moved forward rapidly.

What should Iowa do? During the late spring and early summer of 1884 Commissioner Fairall visited many parts of the State and everywhere found sentiment favoring participation by Iowa. In fact, in many counties farmers began to save samples of their best products for an exhibit. Funds to promote the work systematically were lacking, however. A meeting, held in Cedar Rapids on August 27, 1884, to devise ways and means whereby Iowa would be creditably represented at New Orleans was attended by a large number of interested citizens from many parts of the State. Enthusiasm prevailed, and a plan was formed whereby contributions would be received from individuals as a quasi-loan with the expectation that the next General Assembly would reimburse the contributors by an appropri-

ation. This plan was endorsed heartily by the press of Iowa and by the people generally.

An Iowa Commission was organized with Governor Buren R. Sherman as president; Herbert S. Fairall, the United States Commissioner from Iowa, as secretary; and John S. Ely, the Alternate Commissioner, as treasurer. The Commission also included the persons selected as superintendents for the various parts of the State display, an honorary commissioner from each congressional district, and an assistant commissioner in each county. To the county assistants fell the task of aiding in the collection of exhibits and the general encouragement of the project.

As the Iowa Commission was not organized until the latter part of August, 1884, only three months remained in which to select, assemble, and install the contemplated display. The county assistants were supplied with bags and glass containers and, notwithstanding the fact that the harvest season was mostly over and the time for collection short, they succeeded in gathering materials for an extensive exhibit. The products of the farm, the orchard, the dairy, the shop, the mill, the home, the school, and the factory together with samples of the mineral and geological wealth of Iowa were assembled at various cities throughout the State and loaded into freight cars for shipment to New Orleans.

Two car loads of exhibits, shipped from Cedar Rapids on Saturday evening, November 29th, over

the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railway, were wrecked a few miles north of Burlington the following morning. In the car which contained articles for the woman's department at the Exposition all was a mess. Large oil paintings were torn and defaced or, if the pictures escaped, the frames were ruined beyond redemption. Many valuable specimens of painted china were shattered into tiny pieces. Collections of bric-a-brac were broken, scattered, and totally destroyed. A monster eagle, once a fine example of taxidermy, lay on the floor with its head twisted nearly off and a hole torn in its breast. The needle and fancy work escaped with the least damage, although many articles were soiled and crushed. Jars of extracted honey were broken, and their "liquid sweetness" had trickled over many of the paintings and much of the lace work and embroidery of "Iowa's fair daughters".

The second car contained manufactured goods and agricultural products, including an extensive flour exhibit. Large displays of oatmeal from Dubuque and Muscatine mills were practically ruined. The platform around the car and the inside of the car itself were covered with oatmeal and flour. From a display of one thousand cans of fruit and vegetables packed by the Cedar Falls Canning Company, scarcely one hundred cans remained intact. Huge pumpkins and squashes were smashed, while bundles of corn and grain on the stalk were badly damaged. Many of the pumps sent by the

Cedar Falls Pump Company were twisted and broken. The Cedar Rapids oatmeal exhibit, however, fared better than others and much of it was salvaged. Strange to say the large glass tubes eight feet long and a foot in diameter which were designed to display the depth and quality of Iowa soil emerged from the wreck uninjured.

Only two weeks remained before the opening day of the Exposition and the destruction of two car loads of important exhibits was a discouraging blow to the members of the Commission, already handicapped by lack of funds. Nevertheless, efforts were redoubled and the loss was to a large extent replaced.

Commissioner Fairall, who was editor of the Iowa City *Republican*, fitted up a baggage car with presses, type, and all the paraphernalia of a newspaper office in which he planned to print and issue a daily paper en route to New Orleans. At the Exposition *The Daily Iowan*, as the sheet was called, was to be continued as the special organ of Iowa interests.

About five o'clock on Monday afternoon, December 1, 1884, a special train consisting of a day coach, a baggage car, and "the Daily Iowan on wheels" left Iowa City with the members of the World's Fair Commission on board. The first number of *The Daily Iowan*, containing an illustrated sketch of the Exposition and information about the part to be taken by Iowa at the World's Fair, was distributed

to members of the excursion and to large numbers of Iowa City people who had gathered at the depot to witness the departure. Additional copies were handed out at towns along the line between Iowa City and Burlington. At the latter place a Pullman sleeper was added to the train, and the party was increased to twenty-eight by the arrival of other members of the Commission who had come to Burlington to inspect the wreck.

The excursionists arrived in St. Louis on the morning of December 2nd, where they were cordially received by the St. Louis Board of Trade. Carriages were provided and the guests were taken to see the Eads Bridge, Shaw's Gardens, and other points of interest about the city. Meanwhile, the force of *The Daily Iowan* had been hard at work preparing the second edition of the paper which came off the press at three o'clock. Five thousand copies were struck off and distributed, a feat which elicited much praise from the St. Louis press.

From St. Louis the train crossed the Mississippi and followed the Illinois Central route southward. At Holly Springs, Mississippi, the venerable statesman, L. Q. C. Lamar, immaculately dressed and wearing a white plug hat, met the train and welcomed the commission to the southland. On Thursday morning, December 4th, the party reached New Orleans, and went to a house on South Charles Street which Commissioner Fairall had rented for the winter — a dwelling which had once been the

headquarters of General Ben Butler. The excursionists, coming from the cold and snow of Iowa, were delighted with the warm breezes, the roses, and orange trees of New Orleans.

Iowa commissioners and superintendents who were eager to rush forward the installation of the State exhibit found the Exposition buildings and grounds in an unfinished condition. Rainy weather which set in soon after their arrival added to their troubles. Moreover, the delayed arrival of several car loads of exhibits, some of which did not reach New Orleans until December 13th, also interfered with the preparations, while the loss of important exhibits in the train wreck caused unforeseen difficulties. Well-intending citizens forwarded various products to New Orleans by express C. O. D. Many of these contributions were not suitable for the exhibit but to refuse them would have caused offense. Consequently the intended kindness further depleted the already meager funds of the Commission and caused no little embarrassment. Throughout December and January superintendents and assistants labored hard to complete their task, and by the last of January an exhibit was ready which represented the resources of Iowa in a most attractive manner.

Late in January, 1885, occurred an event which aroused the indignation and outspoken disapproval of the Iowa contingent as well as other northern visitors at New Orleans. The old Liberty Bell from Independence Hall, Philadelphia, was sent to the

Exposition and ushered within the grounds with much pomp and ceremony on Monday evening, January 26th, around six o'clock. Its arrival at the Exposition park was heralded by the blowing of whistles and the firing of salutes by war vessels anchored in the river. Darkness had settled down and the vast auditorium of the Main Building was ablaze with light from hundreds of incandescent bulbs. Thousands of visitors filled the hall to capacity.

As the car carrying the bell was pushed slowly into the building, the crowd went wild with demonstrations of patriotic zeal. While the people were cheering, a tall, slender man with gray hair descended from the car and walked erectly but with unpretentious mien down the central aisle to the platform, accompanied by part of the reception committee and a retinue of followers.

Then the cheers swelled in volume for many recognized the tall figure as Jefferson Davis, the idol of the Confederacy; and as the little party ascended the steps to the mammoth stage the band struck up the stirring strains of *Dixie*. Pandemonium broke loose and the lusty cheers of the Southerners were met by an outburst of hearty disapproval by many Northerners in the crowd. The tenseness of the situation was relieved, however, by postponing the formal reception ceremonies until the next day by which time Davis had departed. Although the incident caused strained feelings temporarily, it was

soon forgotten in the constantly increasing attractiveness of the Exposition.

Iowa visitors at the New Orleans fair were delighted with the green lawns, blooming flowers, and balmy, fair weather during February and March. To reach the Exposition grounds, distant some five or six miles, they usually took a horse car from down-town New Orleans. The car line extended past a long row of large white houses with green blinds and wide galleries set in spacious lawns dotted here and there with huge magnolia trees. Then came a swamp with little, half-clad darkies playing along its borders. Next several beer saloons appeared, which gave way in turn to orange groves, especially delightful to northern eyes, and pleasant frame houses set in the midst of gardens of blooming flowers and "strange-looking giant leaved plants". Past more swamp land, more gardens and orange groves, more saloons and shanties, the sight-seers finally reached a host of side shows, circular railroads, merry-go-rounds, toboggan slides, roller coasters, dime museums, mermaids, monsters, freaks, shanty saloons, and restaurants outside the main entrance to the Exposition.

Paying an entrance fee of fifty cents visitors passed through the turnstiles and saw before them the Main Building which was nearly a quarter of a mile wide. Flags and bunting floated from every corner of its low, irregular roof. The front was painted a dull gray tone with the panellings and

projecting woodwork a reddish brown. On the front of the main entrance a statuary group represented the progress of America. "Columbia robed in flowing gown, in her left hand a laurel wreath, in her right hand a wand" stood pointing majestically to the path of progress. America, represented by an Indian maid sitting astride a buffalo, was ready to begin the ascent. Civilization, represented by a woman in the garb of the eighties with a sheaf of wheat in one hand and a garland of roses in the other, seemed ready to encourage America up the rugged path, while an Indian brave sat on an adjacent rock resting his elbows on a war club.

From the Exposition entrance a wide asphalt walk led up to the Main Building. To the right, half a mile away, was the Government and State Building — a long, low, green painted structure with large glass skylights. To the left, at an equal distance and against a background of giant oak trees, was Horticultural Hall. In the foreground to the left was the Mexican Building — a large structure of iron and glass — while beyond, the spars of vessels at the Exposition wharf could be seen. Lakes and fountains and groves adorned the Exposition grounds.

Iowa exhibits were to be found in the Government and State Building, the Main Building, the Machinery and Carriage Annexes, and Horticultural Hall. Space beneath the gallery of the Government and State Building was allotted to States and Territo-

ries for headquarters. The Iowa section comprised two general reception rooms and the private office of the State Commissioner. Copies of the prominent newspapers of Iowa were kept on file in the reception rooms, and a postal cabinet made it possible for Iowa visitors to receive their mail at the State headquarters. The rooms were comfortably and neatly furnished, and all Hawkeye visitors were given a cordial welcome. Over fifteen thousand names of Iowans together with their home address, occupation, and New Orleans address appeared in the headquarters register at the close of the Exposition in June.

In this building the Iowa exhibit occupied nearly twenty thousand square feet of floor space. The centerpiece of the agricultural display was a grain pagoda, octagonal in form. Its walls were twelve feet high and its circular roof was surmounted by a spire. Golden grain encircled the spire and the roof was covered with layers of oats, wheat, rye, and barley, trimmed out to the cornice with large ears of corn of many colors. Artistic designs made from red, white, yellow, and blue corn covered the walls, while doors and windows were trimmed with grain on the stalk and with corn cut in fantastic shapes. Around the base of the structure were baskets heaped high with corn while the inside walls and ceiling were lined with corn and sheaves of grain. On either side of the two doors of the pagoda stood glass tubes eight feet long showing the depth and

richness of Iowa soil. A glass pyramid twenty feet high was filled with corn on the stalk and sheaves of wheat, oats, rye, and barley. Around the base of the pyramid were hundreds of glass bottles containing samples of seeds. Enormous vegetables were arranged in attractive piles. The agricultural exhibit from Iowa, superintended by F. N. Chase of Cedar Falls, received universal commendation.

In the main gallery directly over the Iowa headquarters, visitors found an extensive educational exhibit. Much of this work was preserved by J. W. Akers, Superintendent of Public Instruction, from the attractive Iowa exhibit at the educational exposition held in Madison, Wisconsin, during the previous July. Contributions from many schools not represented at Madison swelled the New Orleans exhibit so that it shared honors with the adjoining Minnesota display as the most complete and attractive educational exhibits at the Cotton Centennial. Professor T. H. Macbride of the State University of Iowa and Superintendent Akers labored hard to arrange the samples of school work from the kindergarten through the University. Thousands of pages of work in arithmetic, grammar, geography, penmanship, and history, examination papers, relief maps in putty, mechanical drawings, and crayon sketches were neatly displayed. One striking feature was a huge map of Iowa showing the location of every schoolhouse in the State.

Across the gallery from the Iowa educational ex-

hibit appeared the handiwork of the women, superintended by Mrs. Mary S. Scott of Nevada, Iowa. Handpainted china, crayon portraits, oil paintings, water color sketches, devices patented by Iowa women, literary and musical productions, millinery, knitted articles, crochet work, lace, tatting, embroidery, quilts, pantry stores, plaster and clay busts of Iowa statesmen, were a tribute to the skill of Iowa women.

Iowa dairymen, with C. A. Huston of Cedar Rapids as superintendent, bearing in mind the gold medal won at the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876, put forth a special effort to make a creditable showing at New Orleans. How well they succeeded was evidenced both by the size of the exhibit and the prizes won. The Northeastern Iowa Dairymen's Association exhibited four hundred tubs — twenty-eight thousand pounds — of choice creamery butter worth eight thousand dollars at that time. The Diamond Creamery Company of Monticello displayed several tons of butter packed in hermetically sealed cans for shipment to warm climates. William Beard and Son of Decorah sent one hundred and fifty tubs of butter, while many other firms furnished smaller exhibits with the result that Iowa again won first prize and a gold medal for producing the best creamery butter in the world. Wisconsin, however, won first place on its display of dairy butter with Iowa a close competitor. Iowa creameries and dairymen were rewarded for

their enterprise with many orders for butter from southern merchants and from Central and South American firms.

Under the direction of Professor Samuel Calvin of the State University, the Iowa geological exhibit attracted much attention. Arranged in cabinets with glass fronts were specimens of rock from the geological formations of the State, fossils illustrating the prehistoric ages of Iowa, and samples of building stone in blocks of various sizes cut in several faces so as to show different modes of preparation. Samples of brick, drain tile, different kinds of clay, crystals, and lead and zinc ores were attractively displayed. The mine owners of Dubuque arranged a grotto containing mirrors so placed as to give spectators the impression that they were gazing into an almost limitless cave in which was reproduced in miniature all the beautiful and curious effects arising from lead formations.

To Colonel G. B. Brackett of Denmark, Iowa, who had won a gold medal for his apple display at the Philadelphia Centennial, was assigned the supervision of the horticultural display at New Orleans. With the substantial support given him by the State Horticultural Society, Colonel Brackett arranged a collection of Iowa apples in pyramidal form on a long table placed at a conspicuous spot in Horticultural Hall. The judges awarded a gold medal to Iowa, and two hundred dollars in prizes for the best collection of apples from northern States.

Another Iowa exhibit which caught the attention of visitors was an array of three hundred and twenty-one brands of flour from two hundred and eighty mills representing ninety-one counties of the State. The sacks of flour were artistically arranged by J. J. Snouffer of Cedar Rapids on a double rack forty feet long and twelve feet high. For this exhibit Iowa won a gold medal and first premium.

The display of manufactures and machinery from Iowa, under the supervision of W. C. Huntington of Des Moines, sustained the rank assigned to the State as a manufacturing center by the census of 1880 which placed Iowa second of all States west of the Mississippi. Indeed, visitors who were accustomed to think of Iowa solely as an agricultural State were surprised at the extent of the industrial exhibit of manufactured goods in the Government and State Building, of machinery in the Main Building and the Machinery Annex, and of vehicles in the Carriage Annex. Furniture from Burlington, wire goods from Dubuque, paints from Des Moines, leather goods from Grinnell and Ottumwa, wagons from Dubuque and Marshalltown, woolen goods from Des Moines and Bonaparte, starch and meat products from Ottumwa, churns and dairy implements from Cedar Rapids, iron work from Keokuk and Dubuque, pumps from Cedar Falls, and a host of miscellaneous articles from towns and cities throughout the State won a large share of prizes. A tower clock made by Joseph Barborka of Iowa

City and placed in a large glass case on a platform in front of the Iowa headquarters kept exact time from the moment of starting at noon on December 25, 1884, until it was removed at the close of the Exposition in June, 1885.

Under the supervision of Alexander Clark of Muscatine the colored people of Iowa had an exhibit which attracted considerable attention in the Government and State Building. Prominent among the articles displayed were a wax cross, an oil painting of two water lilies, two iron horseshoes, several lambrequins, calico quilts, needlework, wax flowers, and eleven bottles of medicine prepared by a negro doctor.

One of the important occasions at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial was Iowa Day — Wednesday, May 13, 1885. Twice the event had been postponed because of conflicting interests, and it was practically the last of the State celebration days. Nevertheless, bright, cool weather, combined with a large attendance of Iowans at the Exposition and the presence of a consolidated Iowa band of over one hundred pieces, an Iowa National Guard Company, and General C. S. Bentley of Dubuque with his staff, all aided in making a successful celebration.

At nine o'clock on the morning of May 13th the Iowans met near the Clay monument on Canal Street in the city and marched to the wharf where they embarked on board the steamboat *Clinton* for

the Exposition grounds. At the Exposition wharf several officials met the Iowa party and acted as an escort to the Main Building. Strains of martial music from the huge band drew people from all over the grounds to view the procession. The parade moved down the crowded aisles of the Main Building to the office of the Director General where the band played *Dixie*, thence the procession proceeded to the Government and State Building where another halt was made at the Iowa headquarters which was a veritable bower of flowers for the occasion.

Joined by the United States commissioners the procession formed again and started for the open-air auditorium under the giant oaks. At the head marched the Iowa Commission and the military officers, then came the band — the State University Band in brown dress uniforms and white helmets, the Osage Band in blue and gold uniforms with plumed helmets, the Dubuque Drum Corps in scarlet and gold, the Eldora Band and the Decorah Drum Corps both resplendent in gold and gray — followed by the United States Commissioners, and they in turn by Iowa visitors and others.

At the open-air auditorium speeches were made and musical selections were rendered by the consolidated band. A particularly pleasing event of the formal program was the presentation of a basket of choice flowers by Miss Mary A. Scott of Iowa to Mrs. E. A. Burke of Louisiana, wife of the Director General of the Exposition. The presentation

speech voiced the keynote of the program. "As a daughter of Iowa, and in behalf of the Hawkeye State — itself one of the daughters of Louisiana — permit me, Madam, to offer you this slight expression of our love; and to voice the hope that the sentiments uttered to-day may never perish."

Iowa badges, with a folder bearing a greeting from the daughter to the mother State, were distributed to the immense crowd. At the same time five thousand maps of Iowa showing the location of the schoolhouses were given to visitors. This map carried the inscription, "A school house on every hill-top; 13,624 school houses; 22,516 school teachers on Iowa's great farm".

Again, as at the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876, Iowa took a conspicuous and worthy part at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial at New Orleans in 1884 and 1885 — a rôle which inspired increasing friendliness between the North and the South.

BRUCE E. MAHAN